"Don't Jew Me": How Antisemitism is Expressed, Experienced, and Ultimately Challenged

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Introduction:

The United States has often been called the "land of equal opportunity." There are even laws that protect people from discrimination. Yet, the discrimination and marginalization of non-dominant groups has persisted through multiple generations. Discrimination and marginalization exist in many forms; they are not always direct or overt. Often, discrimination starts as being expressed in casual conversation and reinforced among like-minded peers. If left unchallenged, the social norms that would otherwise control this behavior start to change (Chekroun, 2002). If left unchallenged for long enough, discriminatory language in casual conversation can evolve into physical action in the form of violence.

This paper focuses specifically on antisemitism, how Jewish people experience it, and how it might be challenged. My research will show that historical stereotypes about Jewish people are the primary source for antisemitism both contemporarily, and in the past. My findings indicate that antisemitism exists in casual conversation and humor among non-Jewish people, who might not be aware of the potential consequences of repeating anti-Jewish stereotypes. Additionally, my research will show that these stereotypes can transform and become part of a subculture of antisemitism. Finally, my research will show how education is an important part of traditional Jewish life (Burstein, 2007) and how it can be used to ultimately challenge antisemitism.

Literature Review:

Jewish people have historically been targeted for discrimination and persecution. Anti-Jewish discrimination stems from misconceptions and stereotypes. It has been noted that stereotypes about Jewish people can be found as far back as the Middle Ages. These stereotypes are largely based on physical characteristics which were used to link Jewishness and evil (Moyaert, 2022). Most of these stereotypes, such as having a goatee beard or two smaller fingers, are not

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commonly used in contemporary American society. The stereotype that has persisted through multiple generations is Jewish people having a large or hooked nose. During the Middle Ages, a hooked nose signified "voraciousness, arrogance, and wantonness" and was "seen as a sign of the Jew's perverted character and diabolic nature" (Moyaert, 2022, p. 385). During World War II, Nazi propaganda stated, "One can most easily tell a Jew by his nose. The Jewish nose is bent at its point" (Moyaert, 2022, p. 392).

Stereotypes about Jewish people, like the "hooked nose," are sometimes casually used as humor. Cieslik and Phillips (2020) found that antisemitic jokes are harmful to the Jewish community and tend to come from a lack of experience speaking with Jewish people and are often related to stereotypes about physical appearance and greed. When seemingly "harmless" jokes about Jewish stereotypes go unchallenged by witnesses, antisemitism becomes normalized. Social norms that require a bystander to engage in an effort to protect the public good are ". . . likely to disappear if deviant behaviors are not sanctioned by social control" (Chekroun and Brauer, 2002, p. 854).

When antisemitic jokes persist online, they can evolve to real-life actions. There is strong evidence that links the online discussion of hate to real-world impacts (Hswen, 2022). Additionally, a violent attack on a Pennsylvania synagogue that resulted in eleven people being murdered has been linked to antisemitic conspiracy theories (Wright et al., 2021). The widespread nature of these conspiracy theories has increased concerns among Jewish people about harassment, even if they have had no first-hand experience with antisemitism, themselves (Wright et al., 2021).

Jewish people are strongly affected by reports of violent antisemitic incidents in the news (Wright et al., 2021). The 2018 attack on the Tree of Life synagogue in Pennsylvania and the

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2019 attack on the *Chabad* synagogue in California have both been associated with elevated concerns about antisemitism in the Jewish community (Wright et al., 2021).

Education is an important aspect of Jewish culture and traditional Jewish life (Burstein, 2007). However, anti-Jewish discrimination also exists on college campuses, and has been on the rise. It has been pointed out that a "crisis of antisemitism" has been building on these campuses, which have been referred to as "hotbeds of antisemitism and anti-Israel activity" (Wright et al, 2021, p. 462).

Methods:

The data for this research was gathered through interviews and content analysis. I conducted two semi-structured interviews. One interview was done in-person at the subject's home; the second interview was conducted in a video-chat format over Zoom. Both interviewees were raised in Jewish households and identify as Conver, Jewish and Orthodox Jewish, respectively. Conservative Judaism follows a moderately strict adherence to traditions and cultural rules; Orthodox Judaism follows a stricter adherence to traditions and cultural rules than Conservative Judaism.

In order to prepare, I created an interview guide that allowed for open-ended, inductive questioning. The guide also (Esterberg, 2002) listed the main topics and wording of some of the questions I intended to pose to my interviewees.

Both interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format with open-ended questions. I chose this method because there were certain topics and concepts I wanted to cover, but I also wanted the interviewees to feel that they could discuss and expand on the topics; I did not want them to feel restricted in their responses. Esterberg (2002) notes that each interview should be tailored to

the individual research participants and that semi-structured interviews allow for a freer interaction between the interviewer and interviewees.

As the interviews were being conducted, I took thorough notes during each dialogue and then utilized a self-voice recorder to add additional details and recollections, including important interactional data. I did this immediately after the interviews while the information was fresh in my mind.

To analyze the interview data, I began with a data sort by selecting the portions of the interview that provided important sociological and interactional information. After isolating these portions, I used open coding by making notes in the margins about important concepts that appeared in the data. I then engaged in focused coding by further developing these notes into sociological themes to be analyzed.

A content analysis of various items in American culture was conducted in an attempt to gather sociological data related to antisemitism – this proved to be a rich source of information. I reviewed a number of YouTube videos that were posted by Steve Hofstetter, a Jewish comedian. I found that several of his videos involved an audience member who engaged in antisemitic language or behavior; I used scholarly literature to analyze this content. These videos were helpful because they showed different ways that antisemitism can be expressed, experienced, and challenged. I only used one of the videos that I found because it directly related to a specific sociological theme that I was developing from the data.

I also conducted a content analysis of a YouTube video posted by a news organization, Fox 11 Los Angeles, about a recent social media post that was created by a celebrity. I chose this for analysis because it was reported in the national news, and it exemplifies how antisemitism can

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spread over social media. In addition to the original social media post, I also reviewed the "Comments" section of the video and discovered a number of antisemitic statements from the public that could be analyzed.

A qualitative approach used in conjunction with a "sociological imagination" helped me to understand not only how my interviewees experienced antisemitism, but also how antisemitism is experienced and expressed in a larger social context. The Jewish community exists as a marginalized group in the United States and the knowledge that many people have about its members comes from false narratives based on jokes and stereotypes. A grounded sociological approach was used in this research to examine how anti-Jewish discrimination has and continues to be expressed in language, and how this discrimination affects the lives of Jewish people. The grounded approach methodology was utilized to allow the gathered data to generate the sociological themes discussed in this paper and, more importantly, to help amplify the voices and stories of a community that has historically experienced persecution, suspicion, and violence.

Expressions and Experiences of Antisemitism – and a Way to Challenge It

This research highlights how antisemitism is expressed through language, action, and inaction. Jokes are made at the expense of Jewish people and are typically based on common stereotypes that have persisted through multiple generations. Jewish people are also targeted for violence and people who witness antisemitism rarely intervene. All these forms of discrimination serve to identify members of the Jewish community as "others."

Using "Jew" as an Antisemitic Expression

The word, "Jew," is used as a pejorative label to marginalize Jewish people. This term can be directly antisemitic towards someone who is Jewish, or it can be indirectly antisemitic when

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directed towards someone who is not Jewish. In the following example, Rebecca, a Jewish

mother born outside the United States and living in San Diego, discusses a conversation she

overheard and the events that followed:

> "Another experience I had was where a friend said something that was antisemitic. I heard my friend say, 'Don't Jew me' in a conversation. It wasn't towards me; it was about something else. I responded and asked him what he meant by that. He tried to brush it off and say something like, 'Oh come on, you know what I mean. It's the stereotype.'"

In Rebecca's example, an indirect form of antisemitism is demonstrated. Rather than directly

insulting somebody who is Jewish, her friend uses the term, "Jew" as a negative way to describe

a non-Jewish person's behavior when they were "acting" Jewish. When he is confronted by

Rebecca, he attempts to justify his language by saying it's the "stereotype." Research has

indicated that the negative use of words like "Jew" is harmful to the Jewish community (Cieslik

and Phillips, 2020). Stereotypes about the physical or personality characteristics have historically

been used to marginalize Jewish people and justify antisemitic language and behavior.

"He's got a big nose": Humor Based on Historic Stereotypes

Antisemitic language is not only used in an intentionally harmful way, but also as humor at the

expense of Jewish people. A content analysis was conducted of a YouTube video that was posted

by Steve Hofstetter, a comedian who is Jewish. In a video recording of one of his live

performances, Steve poses a question to the audience, asking if there are any other Jewish people

in the room besides himself (Hofstetter, 2013). An audience member points to someone and

responds with an antisemitic joke:

> "He's got a big nose. He's a Jew." A few other audience members laugh. The comedian, Steve Hofstetter, challenges the antisemitic comment by replying, "Uh…That's not how that works. You said that, you're a dick. That's how it works."

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This incident illustrates how antisemitism can casually be expressed in the form of humor. Since the audience member was making this joke in a public setting to an outspoken Jewish comedian, it is reasonable to assume that the audience member thought that Steve would not be bothered by his words. Research has shown that antisemitic jokes tend to come from a lack of experience speaking with Jewish people and misunderstandings about Judaism, in general (Cieslik and Phillips, 2020). The audience member uses a physical stereotype (i.e., large noses) to identify another audience member as a "Jew."

As far back as the Middle Ages, stereotypes about physical characteristics have been used to marginalize Jewish people and label them as second-class citizens, or worse – untrustworthy and evil. During the Middle Ages, one of these stereotypes was a large, hooked nose, which signified "voraciousness, arrogance, and wantonness" and was understood to symbolize ". . . the Jew's perverted character and diabolic nature" (Moyaert, 2022, pp. 384-385). These stereotypes were also used as anti-Jewish propaganda during World War II. Julius Streicher, a Nazi propagandist, wrote, "One can most easily tell a Jew by his nose. The Jewish nose is bent at its point" (Moyaert, 2022, p. 392). Antisemitic stereotypes continue to exist because, in part, it is considered socially acceptable to make jokes at the expense of Jewish people. This acceptance was illustrated in the YouTube video when the audience member made a causal remark about the size of someone's nose, and also when some of the other audience members laughed at the remark.

Antisemitism in Social Media and Celebrity Culture

Conspiracy theories about Jewish greed, wealth, and global control can be perpetuated in social media. The following excerpt (Shankbone, 2022) is from an October 2022 social media post created by a well-known rapper, Kanye West:

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> "I'm a bit sleepy tonight but when I wake up I'm going death con 3 On (sic) JEWISH PEOPLE[.] The funny thing is I actually can't be Anti Semitic because black people are actually Jew also[.] You guys have toyed with me and tried to black ball anyone whoever opposes your agenda[.]"

In his social media post, Kanye West makes a public threat against Jewish people, identifying them as enemies or adversaries, and attempts to justify his language by claiming that he can't be antisemitic due to his race. He also uses a common stereotype about Jewish people having a majority control on world affairs, especially as they relate to the media and entertainment industries, as justification for his social media post. This is one of the ways that antisemitic language and beliefs are spread. Anti-Jewish stereotypes are often related to physical appearance and greed (Cieslik and Phillips, 2020). Celebrities are powerful icons in American culture, and their words carry weight. A news organization posted a YouTube video about Kanye West's social media post (Fox 11 Los Angeles). In the following examples, several people wrote remarks in the video's "comment section" to espouse their agreement with the rapper's statements:

> "You can't criticised (sic) the chosen ones. Only worship them. They rule this all game." Another commenter wrote a statement supporting Kanye West: "The man is just saying what everybody is thinking. Truth hurt." A third commenter wrote, "Actually said something truthful…let's not play games." A fourth commenter wrote, "I like this guy[.] He's not afraid to stand up to this cult."

There are numerous other examples of people leaving antisemitic comments. These remarks illustrate how antisemitic beliefs and language can be spread and encouraged through social media, especially when the remarks are made by someone with a high social standing, such as a celebrity. There is strong evidence that links the online discussion of hate to real-world impacts (Hswen, 2022). On October 23, 2022, multiple media organizations reported that a group of people gathered on a freeway overpass in Los Angeles and displayed banners that read, "Kanye is right about the Jews," while raising their right arms in what is commonly described as a "Nazi

salute" (Hamasaki, 2022). Indeed, research has pointed out that antisemitic conspiracies are a main reason why a gunman killed eleven Jewish people in a violent attack on a synagogue in Pennsylvania. Additionally, even Jewish people who have no first-hand experience with antisemitism are concerned about harassment due to how widespread conspiracy theories are that involve Jewish people (Wright et al., 2021).

Active Antisemitism vs. Passive Antisemitism

Jewish people experience antisemitism through both active and passive means. Further, when neutral bystanders passively witness antisemitism without challenging it, the discriminatory behavior is encouraged, and the Jewish person's status as an "other" is exemplified. In the following example, Rebecca describes a confrontation that occurred in the checkout line at a grocery store when she attempted to calm another patron who was frustrated with waiting in the line:

> "He started to go off on me, saying things like, 'You fucking Jew!' I was in shock and shaking. Looking back, I realize how poorly it was handled by staff. One, he got attended to – he managed to jump the line because he was causing a disruption. All I got was, 'Ma'am, I can help you with your groceries outside.' I felt like I didn't want to go back to my car because he might be waiting for me. I waited until I saw him actually get into his car and leave before I felt comfortable enough to go to the parking lot."

Rebecca's experience at the grocery store demonstrates how antisemitism can be expressed both actively and passively. The patron who shouted at Rebecca and made her fear for her safety was actively engaging in antisemitic behavior. The other patrons and staff members who witnessed the incident without intervening or challenging the discrimination were displaying passive antisemitism. The presence of neutral bystanders can serve as a form of social control, and their actions (or inaction) reinforce the status quo. However, social norms that require a bystander to actively engage in an effort to protect the public good, like intervening during Rebecca's

confrontation at the grocery store, are ". . . likely to disappear if deviant behaviors are not sanctioned by social control" (Chekroun and Brauer, 2002, p. 854). There was no social control exerted over the antisemitic behavior at the grocery store. On the contrary, the patron who shouted at Rebecca was given preferential treatment by the staff and allowed to skip the line and purchase their items ahead of other customers. This example of passive antisemitism is likely to have a dual effect: the person who shouted at Rebecca will be more likely to engage in future antisemitic behavior, since it was rewarded by the grocery store staff; and the neutral bystanders who witnessed the incident will be less likely to intervene in future incidents of discrimination, since the antisemitism at the grocery store was left unchallenged.

Experiencing Violent Antisemitism through the News

Jewish people have historically been targeted in physical attacks. When violent antisemitic incidents are reported in the news, the "otherness" that is experienced by members of the Jewish community is exacerbated and can lead to concerns about their own safety. These safety concerns can, in turn, lead to an increased sense of wariness and caution. In the following example, Sarah, a Jewish person living in San Diego, describes how she was affected when she learned about some recent violent attacks on Jewish people:

> "I am definitely affected. The Poway shooting and the shooting in Pittsburgh at the Tree of Life synagogue…it just sorta puts things in perspective of 'Wow, it can happen and has happened.' There was also a recent hostage situation where a man came into a synagogue. It makes me internally vigilant and thankful that I know Krav Maga [a self-defense system]. It's a scary thing that can happen to any community at a church or something for different religious groups. You're supposed to be in a safe place and praying and being together, instead of by yourself, and now there's some kind of added danger in doing that. It makes me think…it makes me want to be more vigilant and know how to defend myself in case of emergency."

Sarah's example illustrates how Jewish people experience antisemitism when they learn about it through the news or similar means. Discrimination can have a significant effect on Jewish

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people, even if they were not victimized by the discrimination, themselves. The two attacks that

Sarah discussed – the 2018 Tree of Life synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh, PA, and the 2019

shooting at the Chabad synagogue in Poway, CA – have both been associated with elevated

concerns about antisemitism in the Jewish community (Wright et al., 2021). Indeed, research has

found that Jewish concerns about discrimination are strongly influenced by media reports of

antisemitism (Wright et al., 2021). The "internal vigilance" that Sarah describes is a result of the

safety concerns that have developed through repeatedly experiencing antisemitism through the

media.

Challenging Antisemitism

One of the ways that anti-Jewish discrimination can be challenged is through education. In the

following example, Rebecca discusses how her experiences with discrimination motivated her to

learn more about antisemitism:

> "I guess the incidents of antisemitism affected me and I took a self-defense class at
> *Chabad* in downtown San Diego. I also volunteered at ADL to learn more about
> antisemitism and get more…I guess…educated on how to approach it. I became more
> aware, and I started to see it more and more – I became more aware of the subtleties of
> antisemitism." After a pause, Rebecca continued, "I volunteered as a participant in ADL,
> and I became one of their leaders to teach the next cohort of volunteers."

Rebecca's example illustrates how she uses education to help her identify and challenge

discrimination against Jewish people. Organizations, like the Anti-Defamation League (ADL),

attempt to raise awareness about discrimination and extremism by providing thorough and

accurate information to communities. Education is an important aspect of Jewish culture and

traditional Jewish life (Burstein, 2007). Rebecca also mentions how she eventually volunteered

at the ADL to help teach others about discrimination. This demonstrates how Jewish people

challenge discrimination through both self-education and educating others.

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The concept of challenging antisemitism through education was a common theme in the interview data. In the next example, Sarah describes how she uses an annual event at University of California San Diego, called "Apartheid Week," as an opportunity to teach people about Judaism:

> "There is something called 'Apartheid Week' at UCSD. Students from all over will gather and hold flags and there are these walls you can sign. A lot of people have antisemitic and anti-Israel signs. When I go, I don't try to confront people. I try to spread around correct information about Judaism and Israel and my experiences with it. I do what I can to spread the right information. I haven't gotten in somebody's face to debate…because it's like, 'Why do I have to defend to somebody what my beliefs are?' But, if they are coming at me with things that aren't facts, I try to understand indirectly why that might be the case."

Sarah's example shows how Jewish people can use antisemitic incidents or events as opportunities to educate others on Judaism, thereby challenging the antisemitism, itself. Sarah's story is also another illustration of how antisemitism is considered socially acceptable, or at least socially tolerable. Recent research suggests that a "crisis of antisemitism" has been building on college campuses in the United States, and college campuses have been called "hotbeds of antisemitism and anti-Israel activity" (Wright et al., 2021, p. 462). The "Apartheid Week" event that Sarah describes exemplifies this antisemitic and anti-Israel activity, and also how she uses it as an opportunity to teach others.

Conclusion:

This research shows that antisemitism is a common experience among Jewish people in everyday life. Importantly, a qualitative approach also sheds light on some of the ways that antisemitism is challenged, as well.

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The prevalence of antisemitism in casual settings, such as a comedy show or in a conversation between friends, demonstrates how antisemitic language has become socially tolerable. In more extreme cases, discrimination against Jewish people is socially acceptable, or even encouraged.

It is important to challenge anti-Jewish discrimination by increasing both awareness and education about antisemitism – this is especially true for those who have little to no experience interacting with Jewish people. This will help to preserve and protect both the Jewish identity and Jewish people. In October 2018, a person who was reportedly obsessed with antisemitic conspiracy theories and armed with an assault rifle entered the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and proceeded to murder eleven Jewish people (Wright et al., 2021). In that same year, the Federal Bureau of Investigation reported a total of 7,120 hate crimes, nearly sixty percent of which were attacks targeted against Jewish people and institutions (Anti-Defamation League). In 2019, the FBI reported a fourteen percent increase in antisemitic incidents from 2018 (United States Department of Justice). This data highlights the importance of actively working against antisemitism and on centering the experience of those who are marginalized by it.

Finally, this research has deepened my understanding about my own Jewish identity and experiences with antisemitism, and also how I might challenge it in the future.

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